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ABSTRACT

Questions pertaining to beginning reading, success, and failure are addressed. The issues of concern are: (1) When reading begins? (2) What preschool activities seem to help certain children succeed as readers? (3) What characteristics and conditions are associated with reading failure in first grade? (4) What early experiences might help children avoid or minimize reading failure? and (5) Just as insurance companies can estimate actuarially an individual's risk of having an automobile accident, can a similar technology be developed to estimate a child's risk of reading failure? Answers to these questions are explored through available literature, history, and research. It is concluded that the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) could provide the needed large-scale, carefully sampled, designed, and controlled assessment of risk factors across all segments of the preschool population. Research based on NAEP might lead to more confident and accurate predictions that a given child is at risk to fail. If we know with some assurance that this child is likely to fail, it might be possible to design a way to intervene so as to avoid or minimize the devastating effects of reading failure. (LMO)

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Early Beginnings, Success and Failure in Teaching Young
Children to Read: Some Abiding Questions and
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Early beginnings, success and failure in teaching young children to
read: Some abiding questions and intriguing possibilities

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Can we learn to predict reading failure? If we could predict it, could we then minimize its effects or even prevent reading failure entirely?

I will try to answer these rather provocative questions in the pages that follow.

For those of us who teach reading, these two questions suggest the possibility of acquiring for education--for the first time, to my knowledge--some of the diagnostic, predictive, and interventive power developed by scientific medicine in the first half of the twentieth century. We may have become as accustomed to the prevasiveness of reading failure as physicians once were accustomed to the pervasiveness and intractability of disease.

I believe that the answers to these two questions--or, at least, such answers as we can arrive at now--are to be drawn from the research surrounding certain other related questions about beginning reading. For me, these related questions seem to divide themselves into five big questions and their components. I will try to state these questions briefly at the outset of this paper, then in later sections attempt to explore such answers as may be available from history, literature and research.

Some Questions about Beginning Reading, Success, and Failure

1. When to begin reading? Where to begin, and in what ways?

What do children need to know in order to learn to read? What can we learn from reading instruction in other cultures? What is reading readiness?

2. What things, done before the first grade, seem to help certain children succeed as readers?

What are the characteristics of successful readers in first and second grades?

3. What characteristics and conditions are associated with reading failure in the first grade?

What indications can we obtain at ages 3, 4, or 5 that a particular child is likely to fail at reading in first grade?

4. What things, done early, might help children avoid or minimize reading failure? What actions might be taken by parents? What actions might be taken by schools in first grade?

5. If insurance companies can estimate actuarially an individual's risk of having an automobile accident, could we develop a similar technology to estimate a child's risk of reading failure?

Could such risk-assessment be helpful in designing failure-prevention measures and programs? In what ways might such an index be used to prevent failure? How could such an index of risk be developed? Could NAEP help in this effort?

1. Question One: Beginnings

When to begin? Should reading instruction begin in school, preschool, or home? In what ways should such instruction be carried out? What do children need to know in order to learn to read? What can we learn from reading instruction in other cultures? What is reading readiness, anyway?

The conventional answer in American education to the question "When to begin?" has been for many years, "When the child is ready." From the days of Morphett and Washburne (1931) this question seems mostly to have implied school instruction in reading to educators, although such diverse writers as Chall (1983), Carroll (1971), Venezky (1975), Curtis (1980), Goodman (1977), Guthrie (1983), F. Smith (1976), Flesch (1955), Smethurst (1975), Huey (1908), and a number of others have suggested that learning to read has roots early in the child's development with the acquisition of language and certain cognitive and linguistic abilities. (This may, indeed, be the only point upon which *all* of these writers agree.)

If reading has its beginnings in the home in early childhood, what ways might it be learned? Such authorities as Doman (1964) and Flesch (1955) advocate direct and forthright (one is tempted to say "assertive") instruction in those things they believe essential. It is interesting that, while they disagree categorically about the methods by which reading should be taught, they are as one in

their "get on with it" approach.

Others have taken a much less activist approach. Dolores Durkin, generally acknowledged to be the leading researcher in early reading, suggests a rich language-arts approach to initial reading instruction, with its beginnings in infancy and preschool (Durkin, 1970). Language development activities are combined with direct instruction in letter names, forms, etc.

Classically, the basal readers used in American schools have readiness or kindergarten level texts. Houghton-Mifflin's classic Getting Ready to Read first appeared in 1958, and is now in its fourth edition. These popular texts are widely used in American preschools to teach children certain pre-reading skills, the letter names, selected letter-sound associations, and a few sight words. There is a precedent: Webster's "Blueback Speller" (1798) and McGuffey's Eclectic Reader (1836) both begin this way as well. While authorities are divided upon the issue of "formal" or "informal" approaches to reading development in early childhood (preschool and/or home), the weight of scholarly opinion would seem to favor an informal approach (Teale, 1986) in early childhood reading.

It is argued, fascinatingly, that we have much to learn about reading acquisition from the ways in which children learn to read in other cultures. The Japanese are formidable indeed where early

reading is concerned. Toddlers in the home are generally expected to learn the basics of reading, and families often take specific actions to encourage this learning (Sakamoto, 1974; Makita, 1969; Sheridan, 1982). Outright reading failure in Japanese schools is relatively rare (Makita, 1969; Sheridan, 1982), though there is much concern over the quality of individual reading achievement.

David Unsaro examines the rich language-learning experience of Soviet children in an article entitled "Can Ivan Help Johnnie?" Whether or not Ivan is much help, the Soviets, who begin formal reading instruction in school somewhat later than we do, report a much lower incidence of reading failure (Unsaro, 1974).

International and comparative studies (Ylisto, 1977; Gezi, 1975; Downing, 1977) are set about with problems for those who might be tempted to draw conclusions about educational practice in one society by comparing it with another. Nonetheless, it is clear that

(a) different countries begin formal reading instruction at different ages, and

(b) some countries report strikingly low incidences of reading failure.

But what do children need to know in order to read? Researchers suggest a long list of skills and understandings. Common sense suggests that, in order to read, a child must know the language, but current research in teaching hearing-impaired

children leads to the conclusion that language and reading can be acquired simultaneously by the hearing impaired.

Chall (1983b) places pre-reading in a separate stage of reading development. Venezky (1975) and others list certain visual and sound pre-reading skills. Pflaum (1974), Briggs & Elkind (1973) and Goodman (1977) emphasize the developmental cognitive and linguistic nature of pre-reading skills, and suggest that these are encouraged by exposure to a stimulating environment. Durkin's language arts approach is outlined in a variety of places, perhaps most clearly in her text, Teaching Young Children to Read (1974). Yaden & Templeton (1985) suggest a variety of linguistic and metalinguistic understandings which appear to underlie beginning to read.

A concensus list of pre-reading skills could be drawn up which, while not actually satisfying everyone, could at least represent the shared view that certain abilities, understandings, and skills exist which a child should possess in order to learn to read.

2. Question Two: Success

What things, done before the first grade, seem to help certain children succeed as readers?

What are the characteristics of successful readers in first and second grade?

Much of the current literature for parents on helping children to become successful readers is based on a rather consistent picture which has emerged of the background of successful readers.

The unspoken assumption appears to be that there are many skills and experiences associated with reading success, and that, if one could just provide these for the child, success might also follow. A healthy skepticism might be advisable here, but there exists considerable evidence of such "skill-and-experience-providing" which has apparently led to meaningful differences in reading achievement (Durkin, 1974, Teale, 1979, Hiebert, 1980, Polk and Goldstein, 1980).

Most authorities agree that the child who is provided with a rich language environment will be helped toward reading success (Larrick, 1976). Reading aloud to the child also gets almost universal approval, and is, perhaps, the most frequently encountered recommendation for parents (Backus and Smethurst, 1976; Smethurst, 1986; NIE, 1985). Parents are often urged to read themselves, and to let their children see them reading (NIE, 1985).

Parents are also urged to provide an abundance of reading materials for the child (Durkin, 1970). Various merchants and publishers are quick to suggest that the child be given this, that, or the other computer software, machine, book, workbook, record, tape, learning program, or encyclopedia. Some writers (Smethurst, 1975, Durrell, 1970) advocate teaching of the letter name and/or letter-sound associations. Others recommend the teaching of certain sight words by parents (Iredell, 1888; Doman, 1955).

Parents are widely urged (though not unanimously) to encourage their children to watch Sesame Street on television. Other television programs that help with reading have a similar, though lower, profile. Parents are also urged to give their children a wide and general experience with the world, by taking them on field trips, to parks, museums, concerts, and so forth. This is thought to broaden the child's store of general information.

Children who read before first grade are often seen as suggesting or possessing certain characteristics which can be inferred to contribute to their early reading. There are some characteristics or attributes found by a variety of researchers to be associated with early readers. While perhaps no single early reader possesses all these, taken all together, they make a composite picture of what an early reader might be expected to be like. I list the characteristics in no particular order.

- May be either boy or girl
- Often has noticeable verbal ability
- Can frequently converse easily with adults
- Is interested in books and reading
- Is somewhat advanced in terms of Piagetian concept development
- Lives around at least some people who value reading and who read themselves
- Owns a good many books of her/his own
- Watched Sesame Street as a younger child
- Likes stories
- Shows curiosity about a number of subjects
- Writes and scribbles often

3. Question Three: Reading Failure and Failing Readers

What characteristics and conditions are associated with reading failure in the first grade?

What characteristics and conditions are associated with reading failure in the second grade?

What indications can we obtain at ages 3, 4, or 5 that a child is likely to fail at reading in the first grade?

If failing readers can be identified and described, it is reasonable to hope that some forewarning or early indications might be picked up at a younger age. The effort to predict reading difficulty involves the same sort of logic as before. That is, "There must be ways in which failing readers are alike: if we can discover some of these ways, we can describe, identify, and possibly treat the failing reader more effectively."

The most consistent and focused effort at prediction appears to have been made by Jansky, de Hirsch, and Langford (1966), Jansky and de Hirsch (1972) and by several researchers concerned with early identification of dyslexic children (Satz, Friel, and Rudegeair, 1976; Eisenberg, 1966; Slingerland, 1971).

Satz et al's work is of considerable interest, because it focuses on developing a simple, replicable test for dyslexia, based on a theoretical framework that views dyslexia as essentially developmental in character: "... more than a reading disorder per se

... explained as a delay in those crucial early sensori-perceptual and later conceptual-linguistic skills that are intrinsic to the acquisition of reading . . . " (Satz et al, p. 115). Satz settled on four major predictor variables: finger localization, alphabet recitation, recognition-discrimination, and dichotic listening, as well as one combination of the WISC Similarities Subtest, the Embedded Figures test, and the Finger Tapping Test. Their design, their conclusions and their theory are debatable--they argue that this instrumentation provides a valid and reliable prediction for screening and intervention, and that reading disability = dyslexia = developmental lag. Nonetheless, their tests should be of considerable interest to researchers (Satz and Friel, 1974) attempting to develop descriptive, diagnostic, or predictive instruments.

Jansky, de Hirsch and Langford (1966) and Jansky and de Hirsch (1972) attempted to develop a diagnostic or predictive instrument.

Jansky, de Hirsch and Langford (1966) and Jansky and de Hirsch (1972) attempted to develop a diagnostic battery of tests which could be given to preschoolers. In their view, "prevention [of reading failure] involves three steps: preschool identification of children likely to fail; diagnostic assessment of such children, and appropriate intervention."

Their tests were as follows:

1. Pencil Use
2. Name Writing
3. Bender Motor Gestalt Test
4. Minnesota Percepto Diagnostic Test
5. Tapped Patterns
6. Sentence Memory (Stanford Binet)
7. Wepman Auditory Discrimination Test
8. Boston Speech Sound Discrimination Test
9. Roswell Chall Auditory Blending Test
10. Oral Language Level
11. Number of Words Used in Telling a Story
12. Category Names
13. Picture Naming
14. Letter Naming
15. Horst Nonsense Word Matching Test
16. Word Matching Subtest of the 1937 Gates Reading Readiness
Test
17. Matching by Configuration (based on Gates)
18. Recognition of Words Previously Taught ("boy" and "train")
19. Spelling Two Words Previously Taught

Durrell concentrated his efforts on the predictive strength of the child's ability to recognize, name, and write the capital letters of the alphabet (Durrell, 1964, 1965).

Slingerland developed a pencil-and-paper test which was designed to identify pre-schoolers who could expect difficulty with reading.

All of these efforts drew from the same common sense base--failing readers are somehow members of a subpopulation who share other characteristics as well. Some of these other characteristics might be listed as follows: (The list is my own, but I believe it represents a reasonable synthesis of the reading disability literature.)

The child is more likely to male than not;

He/she has difficulty learning and remembering letter forms;

He/she often has difficulty writing or copying the letters;

He/she often has difficulty copying simple designs

He/she may have an articulation problem;

He/she is likely to do poorly on a test of auditory skills or

blending ability;

He/she is apt to be distractible, and to have difficulty

sustaining attentional focus;

He/she may have allergies;

He/she may often have a history of otitis, sinus, or similar

infections;

He/she may have a medical history of serious infection,
trauma, or perinatal difficulty;

He/she may show little sustained interest in "stories" or in
being read to aloud;

He/she may have a high activity level;

He/she is likely to have difficulty remembering words after
once learning them;

He/she may be left-handed or left footed;

He/she may have difficulty with orientation of words and/or
letters;

He/she may persist in using juvenile speech forms, such as
"aminal," long after this is expected to disappear;

He/she is likely to experience, in general, a degree of "difficulty
with reading" out of all proportion to that expected from
his/her apparent ability and the instruction given him.

This amounts to a stereotype, but one which any reading
teacher might recognize. There are, to be sure, children who fail to
learn to read who do not fit this stereotype. The composite is
drawn to explain the idea that, "poor readers often look alike,"
which is itself, I believe, at the base of the shared hope that
predictive instruments can be developed.

4. Question Four: Prevention

What things, done early, might help children avoid or mitigate reading failure?

A number of intervention strategies have been devised and used with groups and individuals deemed for some reason to be "at risk" of reading failure (Teale, 1986; M. Smith, 1975; Durkin, 1974; Hoskisson, 1974 ; Slater, 1973; McCracken, 1975; Roettger, 1974; Evans and Smith, 1976; Thomas, 1984).

These efforts share a common thread: a child or group of children is predicted to be in some likelihood of reading failure, so that intervention measures are justified which might head off the failure or its ill effects. Intervention treatment strategies range from language enrichment (Durkin, 1974) to systematic phonics (McCracken, 1973) to psycho-motor skills training (Evans, 1976).

These studies also share a common perspective. All perform or propose interventive teaching that approximates closely the skills, experience and activities of early readers, in an attempt to moderate the "failing reader" characteristics. Children are taught letters, language arts, writing, drawing and tracing patterns, listening and auditory blending skills, general information and cultural enrichment.

There is considerable evidence of the effectiveness of some of these programs, though why they may have been effective is less

clear. These answers will have to await further research.

5. Question five: Risk assessment

Can we develop the technology to estimate an individual's risk of reading failure actuarially much as an insurance company might appraise an individual's risk of accident or illness?

If we could do this, would it help us to prevent reading failure by timely and effective intervention?

The answers to both of these questions is, I believe, "yes."

The final question to be asked is, "Can the National Assessment of Reading Progress help this work in any way?"

NAEP could provide the large-scale, carefully sampled, designed and controlled assessment of risk factors across all segments of the preschool population. The research that we now look to for insight into prediction and prevention of reading failure is too often limited, using small samples, limited often also by theoretical, geographic, or budgetary constraints. As examples of the severity of these limitations, Satz et al's work was done exclusively with white males, Durrell's work was largely done in the Boston area; problems of budget have plagued and even terminated many promising intervention programs.

Conclusion

We have come to see possibilities for helping failing readers in the work on successful early readers, as well as in the studies of intervention strategies. By drawing on the resources of the NAEP, we might be able to develop insight and information that would lead us toward positive answers to our two generating questions. Can we predict reading failure? Our best answer at this time is cautious: "Yes, but without much certainty or assurance."

Research based on NAEP might lead us to much more confident and accurate predictions that a given child is at risk to fail.

If we know with some assurance that a certain child is at risk to fail, can we design a way to intervene so as to avoid or minimize the devastating effects of reading failure? We can try.

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